

The Impossible Art of Populist Government

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One year after it was formed, the Slovak government is falling apart. As of 25 March 2021, [six out of sixteen ministers](#) have resigned their position. For the moment, the government commands a parliamentary majority and therefore a reshuffle of executive positions is more likely than a snap election.

The root of the political crisis is singular: Igor Matovič, the prime minister, is deemed impossible to work with by two out of four coalition parties and an increasing proportion of the broader public. The future of the coalition will to a large extent depend on his willingness to step down from the government.

Matovič's rise to power

The rise of Matovič from populist anti-corruption campaigner to PM was the culmination of a non-linear process started by the murder of [Ján Kuciak in 2018](#). Matovič's uncompromising pursuit of a (frequently populist) anti-corruption agenda appealed to voters in a dramatic electoral campaign that saw his party win 53 out of 150 parliamentary seats.

[Matovič formed a right-of-centre coalition government](#) in May 2020 after elections in February, and widespread anti-corruption protests, with three other parties, including the "We Are Family" party, an ID member at the European level. Together, the coalition had enough votes in the parliament to pass constitutional amendments.

Admittedly, the government was dealt a tough hand with the coronavirus pandemic striking virtually immediately upon its inauguration. Slovakia did well at first, keeping infection rates low and hospitals empty. But in the face of a worsening economic and pandemic situation, tension within the coalition grew stronger, in particular between Matovič and Richard Sulík, the minister of economy. Personal animosity between two party leaders was not the only obstacle to good governance. Matovič adopted an increasingly erratic style of leadership, ducking responsibility for failures and shielding ministers from his party whose positions looked untenable in light of a mounting number of deaths.

Matovič's maverick political style might have worked during his decade as an opposition MP but it turned out, unsurprisingly, to be manifestly unsuitable for leading a country through a pandemic.

Justice and Prosecution

At this stage, nobody can predict if, for how long, and in what composition the coalition government will continue. But regardless of what happens next, the government will be able to point to some form of a legacy after its first year in power: The most obvious one is the 9300 coronavirus deaths, many of them preventable with better leadership and policies.

The government will prefer to underline how it freed the hands of the police and the prosecution to pursue high-level corruption. There have been arrests of leading figures under the previous SMER-SD governments, notably the former justice secretary and judge [Monika Jankovská and special prosecutor Dušan Kováčik](#). The latter was among the most effective players during the SMER era, shielding dozens of politicians and officials from corruption and other investigations.

The embattled justice sector might prove to be the most consequential legacy of the current government. Although the justice minister, Mária Kolíková, is among those who resigned as part of the coalition crisis – and therefore might not be in a position to complete an ambitious judicial reform – the government appointed both a new general and special prosecutor, the two most important prosecutorial positions.

The jury is out on both appointments. On the one hand, the selection process was highly political, with all parties jockeying for support of their preferred candidate. The new special prosecutor is a well-known criminal lawyer and former justice and interior minister. Both prosecutors will therefore have to work hard to prove their independence. On the other hand, given how subservient the previous prosecutorial heads were to SMER and various private interests, the new appointees should easily lift the rule of law standards in the country.

Contrary to populist opinion, governing is not a simple art. Navigating divisive questions, keeping coalitions together and delivering on policy promises requires leadership skills that not all politicians possess. If nothing else, the ongoing political crisis in Slovakia tests the ability of populist outsiders to reinvent themselves as government leaders. Similar figures in other countries will find little encouragement in Igor Matovič's trials and tribulations as Slovakia's PM over the past year.

